Strikes around the World: 1968-2005
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Sjaak van der Velden, Heiner Dribbusch, Dave Lyddon and Kurt Vandaele (eds.)

*Strikes around the World: 1968-2005*


This book is the collection of a number of papers which were presented at two European Social Science History Conferences (ESSHC) held in 2002 and 2004 respectively in The Hague and in Berlin, and finalised in a 2005 seminar hosted by the International Institute for Social History, Amsterdam.

Following the introduction by one of the editors (van der Velden), and a chapter which addresses the issue of international comparison of strike statistics (Lyddon), the bulk of the book consists of a number of chapters devoted to 15 countries, seven from western Europe (Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Netherlands, Sweden and the UK), two from Central and Latin America (Mexico, Argentina), two from North America (Canada and the US), South Africa, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand. All the chapters are national case studies, except one which compares two countries, Australia and New Zealand. The book is closed by a comparative chapter which deals with the problem of explaining national divergences in strike activity (Dribbusch and Vandaele).

All the chapters adopt by and large a common outline. They start with a historical analysis of the national legal and institutional features of the industrial relations and collective bargaining system, including the character and state of trade unions; then pass on to consider strike trends and their main changes over the last four decades, against the background of the economic and social developments of each country, and at times paying special attention to some major event; finally, they end with a few concluding remarks and, in some cases, prospects for future developments. To facilitate a comparative interpretation of strike statistics, in each chapter the reader is informed about the way data are collected and statistics are compiled. The issue of the decline of conflict is widely discussed in most of the chapters; partly addressed is also the other important change of the last decades, the ‘tertiarisation’ of conflict, which is not only a relocation from one to another sector of economic activity. The contributing authors are mostly social and labour historians, sociologists with a focus on labour studies, or industrial relations scholars; no economist is apparently included.

Although each chapter provides a quantitative picture of labour disputes, presenting tables with the basic series of strike statistics since the mid-1960s to 2005 (with few exceptions where data are not available), the studies included in this book do not belong to the category of strictly quantitative analyses aiming at testing with sophisticated statistical and econometric instruments one or another explanatory model of the phenomenon under examination. Some of the ‘classic’ works in this stream, such as the studies by Shorter and Tilly, Ashenfelter and Johnson, Hibbs, Snyder, Shalev, Franzosi...
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and others, are mentioned only in the introductory and final chapters, but they do not constitute systematic terms of reference in the national case studies. Despite this, or thanks to this, the individual chapters provide interesting historical accounts of the strike movement in each country over the last 40 years or so, and, through this, they deal with the broader issue of the regulation of labour in a period of intensified internationalisation of the economy. They are rich in qualitative insights, albeit often not systematically discussed, which is even more interesting as some of the countries under examination are seldom included in similar collections. If only for this, the book is worth reading.

One point which is perhaps excessively emphasised is that of the difficulties connected with cross-country comparisons of strike statistics. This is a longstanding issue in this field of studies. As Lyddon highlights in chapter 3, not only the way in which data are collected and statistics compiled, but even the definition of what is classified as a strike or a lock-out, differs from country to country, and possibly also over time within the same country. Moreover, the legal, institutional and social setting in which strikes take place are different from country to country. So, much caution is certainly required, ingenuities in the analysis are to be avoided, and strike statistics must be interpreted in the light of national specificities. But this is a frequent problem in social sciences, and it would be an exaggeration to exclude any possibility of systematic cross-country comparison, as one might at times get the impression reading the book. Often it is a matter of balance, as it is also shown in the introductory and final chapters which, stressing more general issues and raising interesting interpretative questions, offer a good mix between a general, comparative approach and the attention to detailed, qualitative features of each national experience.

In the Introduction, for instance, Van der Velden, against the background of a criticism of the literature that in the early 1960s predicted a secular decline in industrial conflict and the withering away of the strike (Ross and Hartman; Kerr et al.), underlines the apparent contradiction between, on one hand, the significant enlargement of the worldwide working population for which the recourse to strike action is made available by processes of industrialisation and democratisation, and, on the other, the sharp and prolonged decline in strike activity over the last three-to-four decades, after the heights of the late 1960s and early 1970s. A decline that, with few exceptions, goes beyond country-specific legal and institutional characteristics. Van der Velden discusses possible explanations, mainly with reference to the changing composition of the employed workforce from manufacturing to services, from manual to white-collar workers, from a male workforce to a much higher level of female participation. In so doing, reference is also made to the ‘global movement of industries to regions in the world where labour is cheaper than in the core countries of capitalism’. This process would partly explain the diminished strike activity in the heartlands of capitalism, but would not rule out, according to the author, the expectation that in time the export of strikes could follow the export of jobs. This is a possibility, and there is no reason, at least from a
methodological point of view, to exclude a resurgence of strike activity in the coming years, perhaps originating precisely in the emerging economies as an effect of the enormous social pressures produced by an incredibly rapid process of economic development. By the way, this would even be consistent with the Kerr *et al.* view that workers’ protest in the course of industrialisation tends to peak relatively early and to decline in intensity thereafter. But it is also possible that this expectation underestimates the structural changes intervening in the last decades in the global economy – underlined more than 15 years ago by Michael Shalev – which prevent or hinder a wide revival of strike activity. If it is not correct to extrapolate long-run trends from short-term developments of the past, as Ross and Hartman did in their well-known book, it is also true that, after all, it is now almost 30-40 years that strike activity has been tending to decline in most industrialised countries, with few exceptions – which is not precisely a short period. But a recovery of strikes, or other forms of industrial unrest, could not be excluded even in the core countries of capitalism, perhaps driven by the current inflationary pressures. The fact is that making predictions in the field of industrial conflict is even more difficult than in other areas of social sciences.

The issue of the structural transformation of capitalism, with the worldwide opening of exit options for capital and employers (‘the neo-liberal globalisation process’), is interestingly discussed again by Dribbusch and Vandaele in the final chapter, along with other factors which can affect strike activity. These factors include the electoral system, the structure of collective bargaining, the existence of strike funds, the degree of union security (with special attention to countries with the Ghent system), the type of legal regulation of strikes, and the role of lock-outs, where they are allowed. In reviewing these factors, the authors stress their predictable influence on strike activity, but also mention several cases in which these predictions have been contradicted. For instance, it seems plausible that in highly centralised and strongly coordinated bargaining systems the recourse to strike action is more difficult, because under control of central union authorities, than in countries with decentralised bargaining structures and less coordinated systems. But this plausible causal relationship is challenged by the sharp decline of strike activity in such decentralised systems as those of the UK and New Zealand, on one hand, and, on the other, the extraordinary peaks experienced in Denmark whenever the national multi-sector bargaining collapses. Not only are strikes a complex phenomenon with a multidimensional nature, as the authors stress, but similar factors may affect them in opposite directions depending on contextual circumstances. This does not deny the existence of regularities, but makes explanations, and, even more, predictions, very complicated. So, while most observers would agree that ‘as long as there is wage labour the withering away of the strike will not happen’, it is much harder to decide whether we are currently in the middle of a secular decline or of a ‘long wave of labour unrest’. With its interesting country studies, this book also confirms that making predictions in the area of industrial conflict remains a risky job.
Over the past years, globalisation and its impact on trade unions and the world of work has been the topic of a considerable number of analyses from many political and economic perspectives. Whatever the perspective, the general lesson one may draw from these publications is that the rise of globalisation has meant the demise of trade unionism as it existed in the post-World War II era of the industrialised world. To the extent that there has been disagreement in the literature in conjunction with this assertion, it has generally centred on whether this is stimulating and good or rather detrimental and bad, supplemented as well by an auxiliary discussion of the extent to which trade unions themselves have contributed to this decline and have failed to rise to the challenges posed by globalisation and neoliberal economic policies. While reflections on ‘what went wrong’ for the unions are necessarily part of changing course, all too often they have been stand-alone criticisms devoid of any new perspective. Moreover, much of this literature has defined the decline of unionism as being irreversible, ignoring the political conflicts of globalisation and the role which trade unions have as actors and agents of interest representation.

The book under review is an excellent example of how to refocus the debate toward the ways in which trade unions are addressing the challenges of globalisation. Edited by Verena Schmidt, coordinator of the Global Union Research Network (GURN) and a member of the Bureau for Workers’ Activities team at the ILO, this ILO publication addresses the vital issue of how trade unions are affected by globalisation and how they are responding to the challenges and opportunities in a wide variety of international, national and sectoral contexts. In sum, its purpose is to provide insights into the problems unions are facing – in particular in developing